

# From the Director

The 2007 fire season is over and has once again proven that CAL FIRE is second to none. Even during one of the state's largest natural disasters, the bravery and dedication of our firefighters shone through.

Even before we entered October, the 2007 fire season had already seen a number of high profile fires. In May, CAL FIRE battled fires just outside of downtown Los Angeles in Griffith Park and then on historic Catalina Island. In June, the Tahoe Basin was ravaged by the Angora Fire destroying over 240 homes. These fires were just a small sign of what was to come.

On Oct. 21 at 4:55 a.m, a small fire broke out in Malibu Canyon just south of the Pacific Coast Highway. Fanned by Santa Ana Winds and extremely dry conditions, the fire quickly engulfed the coastal city of Malibu. Over the next week new fires sparked across Southern California. When the smoke lifted over half a million acres were burned, over 2,200 homes were destroyed and ten people lost their lives.

This was without a doubt an extremely devastating fire siege. However, when we compare this siege to 2003, this year there were more fires, but nearly one-third less acreage burned, over a thousand more homes saved and less than half the number of fatalities. Even though we have come so far since 2003, there is still so much more we have to do.

On Jan. 10, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed a massive funding change for our department. The Wildland Firefighting Initiative puts a priority on Californian's public safety by giving CAL FIRE the resources it needs to continue to meet its mission of keeping 95 percent of all wildfires to ten acres or less.

This proposal would put 1,100 new seasonal firefighters on the frontlines during peak fire season, bringing all of our fire engines to four-member crews. Since 2005, Governor Schwarzenegger has signed Executive Orders allowing us to staff our fire engines in Southern California with 4.0 staffing, but this would create a stable funding source with better

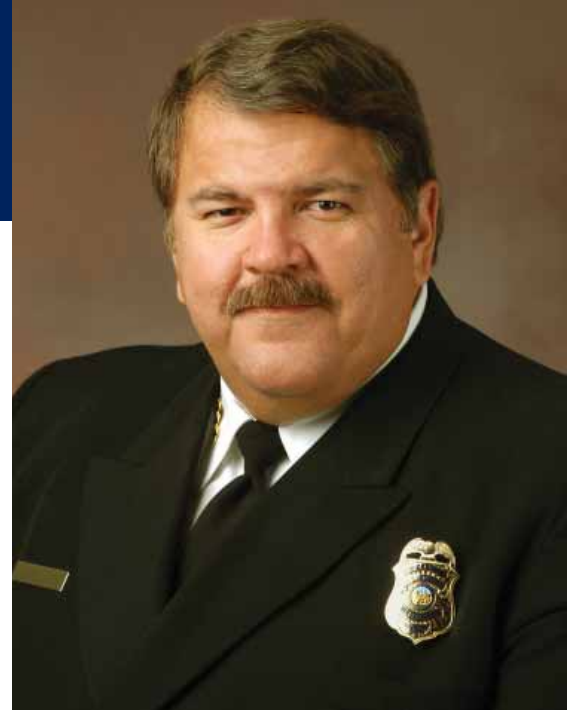
budget planning. The funding would allow CAL FIRE to replace all of its 11 aging helicopters with new, all weather, 24-hour a day flying, all risk helicopters. With these additions our department will be able to help save more lives and property when faced with conditions like we saw in the 2007 Fire Siege.

While the Wildland Firefighting Initiative still needs to pass the Legislature, I have been asked numerous times why all Californians should pay for fires that affect the wildlands? I explain to them that wildfires cost all taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars each year. For the Oct. 2007 wildfires, taxpayers paid over \$291 million in all costs associated with the fires. This cost was paid by all Californians, not just those directly affected. With additional staff and equipment we will be able to reduce the size of wildfires and reduce the amount paid for fire suppression.

Another benefit for all Californians is the fact that CAL FIRE provides mutual aid to local governments across the state for all types of emergencies on a daily basis. We are also an all risk department that provides leadership and resources during major disasters besides wildfires. We have sent crews and teams throughout the state to assist with earthquakes, floods, major hazardous material spills, and more. Many times these natural disasters occur outside CAL FIRE's State Responsibility Areas, but when there is a need, we are there.

Protecting the environment is another priority that affects all Californians. In our mission we are charged with protecting the state's watershed. Wildfires pollute the water with ash and debris. This directly affects the drinking water for the entire state.

It is clear that the Wildland Firefighting Initiative will help CAL FIRE to continue to meet its mission and serve residents not only living in the wildland, but also those in urban areas. This funding will help us with our response, but we must also continue to focus on prevention.



For many years now we have been focusing heavily on Defensible Space and the need for creating a 100-foot clearance of flammable vegetation from homes. We have addressed landscaping around the home, now we must address how a home is built. This year the new Wildland-Urban Interface Building Codes went into effect. These codes will establish a minimum standard for building materials so that they can provide a reasonable level of exterior protection against wildfire exposure.

I strongly believe that with defensible space, stricter building codes and additional firefighting resources we will be able to save more lives, defend more homes and reduce the size of wildfires. We have come a long way and our unbelievable response to the 2007 wildfires is a true testament that CAL FIRE is the premier firefighting agency.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "R. H. J. Alvarez".